“Rhythms of Love”

Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40

Luke 6:27-38

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When I was reading up on today’s gospel text, one of the commentary writers compared this passage to spinach on his child’s dinner plate. “No matter how much I explain the nutritional value,” he wrote, “no one around the table really wants to dig in.”[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTMwLGmKJqS0Dk4UZy6Dwt6UmuAO06wKW6zuauXBF44_9i8asoGxDE9HmyNdIT4N-h8BPblQ7BX2XBm/pub#ftnt1)

I wonder if that was your reaction as you heard today’s text read a few seconds ago. Did you glance at it ahead of time and wrinkle your nose? Did you want to say just now, “Really, Jesus? Love my enemies? Do good to those who hate me? Bless those who curse me?”

These words can be difficult to hear, much less follow. Perhaps we’d rather bargain with Jesus and say, “Okay...how about just...*ignoring* my enemies?  What if I just ignore them whenever they do something mean to me? What if instead of raising my fist or anything else at the guy who cut me off, I just ignore him instead? Do I really have to *love* him?” Or better yet, the even sneakier: “Alright, but I’m gonna kill him with kindness.”

These instructions from Jesus: Love your enemies,bless those who curse you, if truly followed, are maybe the spinach-iest instructions that we find in the BIble - good for us, but hard to swallow. And for those of you who are sitting there smugly thinking, “I like spinach. I’m good,” feel free to substitute whichever vegetable is your least favorite. I know you’ve got one.

I’m not sure which vegetable the disciples and those who were also listening to Jesus’s sermon on the plain would have thought of when they heard Jesus’s instructions that day, but they, too, would have found Jesus’s words hard to stomach because Jesus is not just asking them to go above and beyond in being nice; Jesus is asking them to go against the ever important structural norms of their society involving honor and shame.

Reciprocal gift giving and the relationship between honor and shame were key components in their society and so in some ways, the first listeners of Jesus’s words might have been even more uncomfortable upon hearing.  In ancient Roman society, there was a concept of a fixed amount of honor and shame in the world.  In order for one person to experience honor, another person would have to be shamed.

New Testament scholar Michael Gorman explains the relationship between honor and shame in this way:

“Honor and shame refer to the ongoing attribution or loss of esteem by one’s peers, family, social-class, city, and so on. In Roman society this respect was based primarily on such things as wealth, education, rhetorical skill, family pedigree, and political connections. These were the culture’s ‘status-indicators.’ In this context, ‘self-esteem’ would be conceived of as a ridiculous oxymoron, the only esteem one has is bestowed not by the self but by the group… In this environment, peer pressure is not negative or something to avoid, but is viewed as appropriate and welcome.”[[2]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTMwLGmKJqS0Dk4UZy6Dwt6UmuAO06wKW6zuauXBF44_9i8asoGxDE9HmyNdIT4N-h8BPblQ7BX2XBm/pub#ftnt2)

Similarly, gift giving was reciprocal in nature as well as connected to the very-important honor and shame system in place at that time. Gift-giving was how friendships and relationships were formed. A gift is given in the expectation that a gift of equal value will be returned. If one does not return a gift of equal value, then the shame and honor system steps in — increased esteem and honor for the one who gave the gift and decreased esteem and increased shame for the one who cannot give in return.

Essentially, Jesus is asking the disciples and (anyone else who was listening and also bound up in the system of shame and honor) to give without any expectations of reciprocation, knowing that this will decrease their own esteem within their society.  They were putting their social statuses — something that was incredibly important in their culture and could ensure the health, safety, and prosperity of their families — they were putting these at risk if they truly followed Jesus.

Things are a little more complicated today as we don’t believe in a set amount of honor and shame and because we *do* put value in self-esteem and so giving a coat while not expecting anything in return might increase our own self-esteem and thus have a positive result.

So what part of Jesus’s sermon is hard for us to stomach today?

I wonder if it’s the forgiveness aspect. I wonder if instead of a set amount of honor and shame in the world, we believe that there is a set amount of forgiveness. In a society that values strength and might over peace and love, do we believe that if we forgive too easily, if we forgive too often, if we forgive everyone, does that make us weak?  Do we believe that?

I want to pause to say that I do not think that Jesus is calling anyone to live in an abusive situation, stuck in cycles of trauma.  While his words do call us to forgive, forgiveness can come in a variety of ways and Jesus is first and foremost about mutual love and respect.

But I *do*think that as a society, we have the tendency to connect forgiveness with weakness.

And yet Jesus instructs us to be merciful “just as your Father is merciful.” We are called to forgive *just as* God forgives. And how does God forgive? Jesus tells us that God is kind to the ungrateful *and*the wicked. And lest we begin to think of these instructions as an us vs. them situation, there are times in which we have been ungrateful and there are times in which we have behaved wickedly.

One of the reasons why we have both an individual and a corporate confession each week is because we know that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God — all of us. Every one.

And yet we are told that God loves each and every one of us and forgives each and everyone of us — undeserving as we all are.

One of my favorite hymns is “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” which we will sing in a little bit. I’d heard it growing up and was pretty familiar with it, but it was during chapel week in seminary where I really grew to love it. Chapel week can be a nerve-wracking time for the average seminarian. You’re put with a team of other students and tasked with putting together the 4 chapel services for a given week which will be attended by students, professors, prospective students, and visiting alumni.

It’s a stressful week as students plan out the services. You start to question every aspect of your service: Do these scripture passages go together? Is my sermon theologically correct? Are these prayers appropriate?

When it came time for me to pick hymns for a particular service, we were focusing on God’s grace and so I *knew* I wanted to pick “There a Wideness in God’s Mercy” because it would just work so well with the theme for the day.

The only problem was...I couldn’t find it in the hymnal when I searched online. It was the same hymnal we had at my church back home, so it should be there.  So where was it? What gives?

Finally, I went through the section in the actual hymnal where I thought it should be, page by page, and I found it. And then I also realized my mistake. Instead of “There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy,” I had been searching for “There’s a *Wildness* in God’s Mercy.”  I had confused “wild” for “wide.”

I emailed my hymn selections to our seminary’s organist and included the story of my error as I figured that as a professional church musician, he’d get a kick out of it. Michael emailed me back right away and said that he loved my error and that as far as he could tell, God’s mercy is both wide *and* wild in that God extends mercy to us all — even though none of us are deserving.

There’s a wildness to God’s mercy and we are called to do the very best that we can to mirror that wildness. We are called to mirror that wild mercy in a world that teaches us otherwise...

In the hills of Bethlehem, there is a 105- acre farm that produces almonds and olives,  grapes and figs. The owners of the farm, the Nassar Family, have named the farm “Tent of Nations” which is a reference to the many nations that are represented by the folks who travel to the farm to witness and to work during the harvests.  According to their website, they consider their mission to build bridges between people, and between people and the land and to bring different cultures together to develop understanding and promote respect for each other and our shared environment.

Tent of Nations has been in existence since 1916 and the Nassar Family own the deed to the property and yet and for the past 30 years, it has been under attack by the Israeli government. You see, the farm is owned by Christian Palestinians and is surrounded at all sides by Israeli settlements. The Israeli government has made it illegal for any dwellings to be built upon the land and so the family has gotten creative. They’ve made use of the natural caves that are underneath the land and have gone underground for shelter and storage. And still they are targeted by the government.

Last May, after celebrating 105 years on the farm, a fire was deliberately set and caused severe damage, destroying thousands of almond, olive, and grape trees.

But even in the midst of state sanctioned terror, the Nassar Family and the Tent of Nations practice the kind of wild mercy that Jesus was talking about. As they considered their circumstances and the kind of Christians they wanted to be in light of their circumstances, they sat down and wrote out the four principles that would guide their life on the land. They are:

We refuse to be victims — we must act instead of react.

We refuse to hate. Though confronted on a daily basis, we will not hate.

We will act differently because of our faith.

We are people who believe in justice.

They came up with a slogan to sum up the four principles for which the Tent of Nations has become known.

Written in Hebrew, English, and German are these words, painted on an ancient rock found on the farm: “We refuse to be enemies.” It’s their motto and it’s the phrase they keep turning to as they face new discriminations each day.

In a blog post just a few days after the fire, they wrote about hope still rising and that, their “path is difficult but we need to keep moving forward with faith, love, and hope in action.”

That’s a wild kind of mercy. To face hatred and animosity every day from all sides, and to respond by saying, “we refuse to be enemies,” to proclaim that forgiveness is not a fixed commodity is a wild kind of mercy that doesn’t happen overnight.

Wild mercy like God offers us and like Jesus talks about takes time and practice and God knows we aren’t going to get it right every time.

That’s why Jesus chooses the manner in which he speaks these important words. He speaks in a litany of sorts, with a pattern or rhythm to them.

Love your enemies. Do good. Bless those. If anyone does this to you, do more. If you love, If you do good, If you lend….Be merciful.

Pastor Dena L. Williams writes tells us that  Jesus’s “words are repeated as the deeds they describe are to be enacted repeatedly.  Spoken or performed not once, but over and over again, shaping lives, speaking a rhythm of love and forgiveness and generosity throughout every moment of every day.”[[3]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTMwLGmKJqS0Dk4UZy6Dwt6UmuAO06wKW6zuauXBF44_9i8asoGxDE9HmyNdIT4N-h8BPblQ7BX2XBm/pub#ftnt3)

It’s in the day-to-day forgiveness practice, through the repetition of Jesus’s words, that we learn to live into these words.

Friends, God knows that we will never be able to practice the wild kind of mercy that God extends to us each and every day, throughout every moment of every day. But that doesn’t mean that we’re not still called to try, to attempt to find our own rhythms of love and forgiveness.

It might be difficult to stomach on some days more than others, but as Shirley Temple sang in “Poor Little Rich Girl”: You gotta eat your spinach, baby.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

[[1]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTMwLGmKJqS0Dk4UZy6Dwt6UmuAO06wKW6zuauXBF44_9i8asoGxDE9HmyNdIT4N-h8BPblQ7BX2XBm/pub#ftnt_ref1) Vaughn Crowe-Tipton; Feasting on the Word. Year C Volume 1; pg. 381

[[2]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTMwLGmKJqS0Dk4UZy6Dwt6UmuAO06wKW6zuauXBF44_9i8asoGxDE9HmyNdIT4N-h8BPblQ7BX2XBm/pub#ftnt_ref2) Michael Gorman, Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters, 13.

[[3]](https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vTMwLGmKJqS0Dk4UZy6Dwt6UmuAO06wKW6zuauXBF44_9i8asoGxDE9HmyNdIT4N-h8BPblQ7BX2XBm/pub#ftnt_ref3) Dena L. Williams; Feasting on the Word. Year C Volume 1; Page 383